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Living Objects: African American Puppetry  
Essays

Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry

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2019

## **Black: :Body: :Gesture: From Puppetry to Performance & Design**

Gabrielle Civil

Kelly Walters

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# **Black::Body::Gesture:**

## **From Puppetry to Performance & Design**

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*Kelly Walters, Assistant Professor of Communication Design, Parsons School of Design, The New School*

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In this visual document, Gabrielle Civil and Kelly Walters distill and recreate key aspects of their live dialogue on African-American puppetry, Black performance art, material and digital design. What are examples of African American living objects in the 21st century? What does it mean to animate objects when, as a people, we were once considered to be living objects ourselves? Drawing on their own practice, these artists engaged these questions, activated audience discussion, and transformed the results into a new source text for further activation.

### **Important Keywords + Phrases**

- Diaspora
- The problem with the word “puppetry”
- Representation/instrumentalization
- Digital Blackface
- Animated Reaction GIFs
- The capturing of a moment or the activation of a moment
- Black Body Gesture



*Black::Body::Gesture: From Puppetry to Performance & Design* presentation title slide.  
Photo credit: Kelly Walters.



Gabrielle Civil reading excerpts from "They Came in Shimmying" and "Touch /Don't Touch," from *Experiments in Joy*.

Photo credit: Valeska Populoh. Earlier version of *Touch/Don't Touch* here:

<http://magazine.art21.org/2017/04/19/touchdont-touch/#.X0fuo9NKjOQ>.



Photo credit: Sheila Gaskins.



Gabrielle and Kelly discuss their involvement with the Living Objects Advisory Committee.  
Photo credit: Valeska Populoh.

Our presentation was divided into three parts: performance, discussion around Gabrielle's performance/writing practice, and Kelly's art/design practice. At the beginning of our presentation we shared a series of key questions that guided the focus of our conversation. The questions included the following:

What brought you to Living Objects?

What is your relationship to African-American puppetry?

Can you describe how Black::body::gesture operates in your work?

How do people usually respond to your work--how do they respond especially to your body as a living object?

How does graphic and digital design relate to the key issues of *Living Objects*: race, materiality, presence and popular culture?

### *Presentation Excerpts*



Photo credit: Shay Albert.

### *Contextual Questions*

How does activating the object in performance art relate to puppetry?

What does it mean to make something that could be purple,  
blue, or pink, racially Black?

What does it mean to “throw voice”?

Does “throwing voice” automatically presume appropriation,  
identification or assumption of identity?

In the era of 45 & Black Lives Matter what productive opportunities exist for protest or  
transgression in throwing voice or activating objects? in puppetry or performance art?

Who is a living object? What is a living object?  
What are Black puppets? Who are Black puppets?

### ***Black Feminist Performance Art***

“Performance work created by black visual artists distinguishes itself by moving away from the stage and into the theater of the everyday and the ordinary. It is often temporal and engages visual elements, whether documents or objects. It is rooted in spectacle and...occupies the liminal space between black eccentricity and bodacious behavior, between political protest and social criticism...rooted in black cultural expression and historical lineage.”

– Valerie Cassel Oliver

*Curator of Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*

### ***Object Performance***



Is this chair really empty? What is present and what is absent? How do we animate our ancestors?  
Photo credit: Marcus Brooks Polk.





In her performance art, Gabrielle often activates objects through a praxis of black feminist ritual.  
Photo credits: top, Starr Rien; bottom, Fungai Machirori.

*Muño (fantasía de la negrita)*



Gabrielle during her performance ritual in Mexico.  
Photo credits: Pancho López.



Gabrielle discussed the performance ritual she made confronting and conjuring blackness in Mexico.  
Photo credit: Pancho López.

*Becoming a Living Object*



The highlight of her ritual was transforming herself into a popular Black doll she saw in Mexico.  
Photo credits: Pancho López.



*Design Practice*

Kelly shares her work on *The Black Woman is God* exhibition.  
Photo credits: top, Shay Albert; bottom, SOMArts Cultural Center.

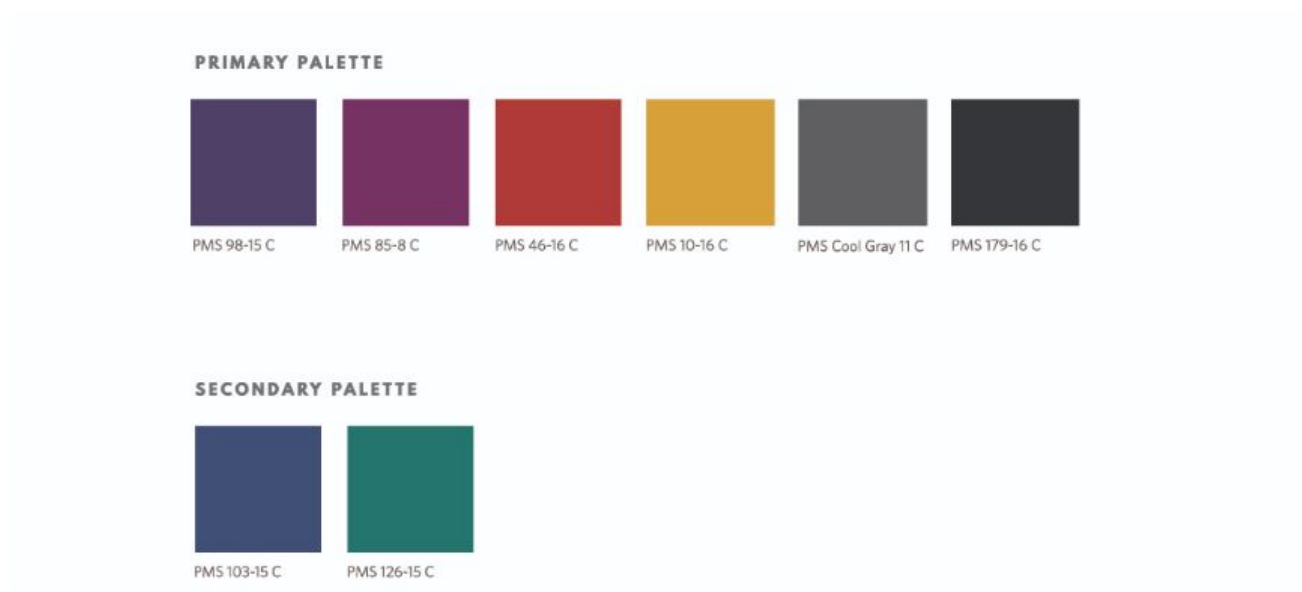


Kelly shares her work on *The Black Woman is God* exhibition.  
Photo credit: Roxanna Myhrum.

### *Designing Living Objects*



*Living Objects* logo identity.  
Design by Kelly Walters.



*Living Objects* exhibition color palette.  
Design by Kelly Walters.



*Living Objects* logo identity during exhibition installation.  
Photo credit: Kelly Walters.



*Living Objects* exhibition title wall and opening.  
Photo credit: Kelly Walters.

### ***Design + Digital Black Gesture***

“Blackface minstrelsy is a theatrical tradition dating back to the early 19th century, in which performers “blacken” themselves up with costume and behaviors to act as black caricatures. The performances put society’s most racist sensibilities on display and in turn fed them back to audiences to intensify these feelings and disperse them across culture. Many of our most beloved entertainment genres owe at least part of themselves to the minstrel stage, including vaudeville, film, and cartoons. While often associated with Jim Crow–era racism, the tenets of minstrel performance remain alive today in television, movies, music and, in its most advanced iteration, on the Internet.”

– Lauren Michele Jackson, *We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface* in *Reaction GIFs* (2017)





*Hidden Beauty*  
Photo credit: Kelly Walters.



*Motown Records*  
Photo credit: Kelly Walters.



*Q&A / Audience Discussion*

Our dynamic dialogue aimed to spark audience discussion and reflection.

Where can we find Black::body::gesture in your own work?

What are African American living objects in the 21st century?

What does it mean to animate/activate objects when, as a people, we were once deemed living objects ourselves?